
Nonreligion and the agency of children: Negotiating nonreligion in collective worship

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Abstract

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Collective worship has been a compulsory feature of maintained schools in England and Wales since the 1944 Education Act. This legal requirement has caused decades of confusion and controversy, with many questioning its educational suitability and appropriateness within an increasingly diverse society. With organisations and policymakers calling for collective worship to be abolished in schools, coupled with the wider place of religion in schools coming under increasing media and political scrutiny, attention to this under researched topic is timely. However, steeped in political rhetoric and relying heavily on adult-generated conceptualisations of religion, much of the discussion on collective worship fails to understand everyday school life and the experiences of children. In response to this and drawing on findings from PhD research on collective worship, this paper focuses on the perspectives of children, whose experiences are often missing from such discussions.

Using ethnographic research from a range of primary schools (faith and non-faith) which foregrounds the agency of children, this paper explores how schools interpret this legal requirement and how nonreligious children respond to compulsory acts of worship in school. In particular this paper attends to children's experiences of prayer during worship and how children negotiate and reimagine the boundaries between the religious and the nonreligious during such occasions. This paper draws attention to the range of strategies used by schools to produce acts of collective worship suitable for children of all faiths and none and the tactics that are then developed by pupils during this part of the school day. By focusing on the voices of children, which are often marginalised in the study of religion and nonreligion, we can move beyond some of the the adult-centric assumptions which dominate this discourse and avoid reproducing the essentialised ways in which childhood, religion and nonreligion are understood.

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